

THE LOSS OF CENTRES AND PERIPHERIES. HOW 'THE OTHERS' SEE 'THE WEST'

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During the many long years of the East-West conflict, the order of our world was based on the universally known principle of bipolarity. By contrast, the concept of a unipolar world in which the USA appeared to play the leading role did not remain intact for very long: there were new global powers on the rise, although they did not at first succeed in undermining the people's confidence in the stability of the new world order. China, India, and the emerging countries were among the states that caused a stir, and it is only recently that their progress has given rise to the question whether the good fortune of 'the others' might imply the decline of the USA as a global power.

There are certainly many in the West who view the rise of China, India, Russia, Brazil, and others with some misgivings. Those who are worried may be subdivided into three groups, of which the first includes those who, regarding China with scepticism, believe that the leading role of the USA will not be threatened even in the next few decades. One of these is Will Hutten, the author of *The Writing on the Wall. China and the West in the 21st Century*. The second group comprises all those who think that China's growth is the prime challenge confronting the USA. They argue that the hub of the global economy will shift to the Asia-Pacific region, not least because of the immense strength of China's industrialization. Martin Jacques, for one, says in *When China Rules the World. The Rise of the Middle Kingdom and the End of the Western World* that the fate of Western dominance is sealed. Lastly, there is a third group whose members are cautious about making forecasts of their own, pointing out that there is a multitude of factors whose weight is almost impossible to assess at the moment including, for example, the question about the nature of modernization or the future role of nation states.

Two recent publications, both belonging to the second camp, reward a closer look: Kishore Mahbubani's *The New Asian Hemisphere: the Irresistible Shift of Power to the East* and Fareed Zakaria's *The Post-American World*.

Mr Mahbubani says that billions of Asians are now on the way to modernity, moving towards prosperity and a new freedom. The West's pretension that a line could be drawn between 'democratic' and 'less democratic' states had become obsolete. Having promoted democracy selectively so far, the West now had to decide what it wanted to defend in the future – its values or its interests.

Mr Mahbubani goes on to say that the West is wishing only too fervently that the global struggle for power might end in its own triumph. Based on this as-

sumption, he outlines three scenarios: in the first, innumerable Asians set out on their way towards a massive democratization of the human spirit, striving for material benefits, the freedom of thought, and options to still their own hunger for education. In this context, the new communication and information media offer the best chance of escaping poverty. The second scenario features a withdrawal of the West into its own 'fortresses'. The states that had profited most from the immense growth in global trade after 1950 had been those who had opened up to free trade. Thus, most of the fault lay with Europe and the USA whose agricultural subsidies had obstructed global development options. The third scenario sketched out by Mr Mahbubani is one in which the West triumphs for good because of its political values. The conviction that any society can ultimately be transformed into a liberal democracy independently of the state of its social and economic development had led the West to the erroneous conclusion that it owed its victory over the Soviet Union to the superiority of its own values. However, the fragility of this belief had emerged in the cases of Yugoslavia and, later on, Rwanda.

The logical consequence of Mr Mahbubani's theories may be the conclusion that the end of Western dominance is imminent. Not satisfied with apodictical theories, however, he sets out on a search for the causes. In his opinion, the crucial dilemma confronting the West is its indecision about the relationship between values and interests. Foreign-policy decisions in which the West was seen as applying double standards had been the consequence of that dilemma. Mr Mahbubani asks: why is it that the West did not treat the Uzbek president, Islam Karimov, in the same way as the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein?

At the same time, there were too many Western politicians still clinging to 'myths' like, for instance, the end of the colonial era or the existence of a global community sharing the views and perceptions of the West. While such myths might well be important for the legitimization of power, it would be a good idea to counterbalance them with realism and pragmatism.

What Mr Mahbubani has to say may be nothing new, but it deserves a response because he says it so frankly and forcefully. At the same time, even Mr Mahbubani displays traces of spitefulness and self-serving interests. When calling upon the West to abandon at long last its strict separation between free and unfree societies, he underpins this demand with a detailed description of what the people of East and Southeast Asia understand by freedom: to the Asians, freedom is much more immediate than it is to Americans or Europeans. It is freedom from want, freedom from insecurity, freedom to choose one's own profession, freedom of economic growth, and freedom from arbitrary arrest.

To support his theories, Mr Mahbubani argues that optimism is growing in the society of China and pessimism in that of Europe. While the West was obsessed by the threat of terror, China was endeavouring to establish good relations with its neighbours and allow them to share in its prosperity. This showed that Asians were quite capable of setting up a stable global order.

While Fareed Zakaria follows the same line as Kishore Mahbubani, his judgements are not as harsh. Dispensing with polemics and inflexible rigourousness, Mr Zakaria understands and even sympathizes with the West and its culture. His focus is less on China and more on India. Mr Zakaria argues that the USA had been entirely deprived of their legitimation in economic policy by the current economic crisis, whereas China and India stood for growth reserves and, more importantly, for an alternative development model. In China especially, the people wanted prosperity and success. Moreover, private business was underpinning economic growth – in the face of the policies of the national government.

Mr Zakaria's key theory is that 'the way to power leads through markets, not empires.' Power was moving away from nation states, becoming more pluralist and diversified. As he does not foresee a centre of power for the future, Mr Zakaria believes it would be misguided to focus on Asia.

In his opinion, the Western shape of today's modernity can be explained by the fact that its development coincided with the rise of the West. However, he cannot perceive any relationship that is necessarily and/or permanently causal. He believes that the coming world will have 'new narratives', and that Bollywood's influence will outstrip that of Hollywood. The modernity of the future will be a melting pot integrated by a culture which will follow 'hard on the heels' of power. In it, India will enjoy great opportunities because of its 'open, willing, and optimistic' society based on an 'exemplary implementation of secularization'.

Unlike Mr Mahbubani, Mr Zakaria does not believe that the USA are doomed. He praises the country's openness and pats it on the back. Although he too mentions the 'rise of the others', he believes it will be long-drawn-out process in which the USA will not necessarily be marginalized. He advises future US governments to 'think asymmetrically and avoid falling into traps' more than before. Although the country would no longer be a 'liberal hegemonial power', it had lost nothing of its potential.

Both books, *The New Asian Hemisphere: the Irresistible Shift of Power to the East* and *The Post-American World* are strong on analyzing future developments. At the same time, neither addresses key foreign-policy problems in any detail. The discourses on history and culture, some of them excessively long, tend to be fatiguing. Moreover, Asia's regional conflicts should have

been given more attention. Then again, neither Mr Mahbubani nor Mr Zakaria are concerned with immediate power shifts; instead, they look at trends that are almost impossible to measure in terms of figures and data. They are concerned with the shape of the global order to come, not with growth rates. And their main concern is the need to change patterns of thought.

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